

News Sun, August 5, 2004

WAUKEGAN - Church mission volunteers stranded in Africa are back home.

The 10 volunteers, members of Wesley Free Methodist Church in Waukegan, were on a mission to Ghana with their pastor, the Rev. Carl Brannon.

Just days after their arrival in Accra, the capitol of Ghana, the airline that flew them there, Ghana Airways, was banned by the Federal Aviation Administration from flying to or from the United States.

Tickets the group had purchased from Ghana Airways were suddenly worthless. It appeared church members would have to stay in Ghana for a month or longer or come up with more than \$20,000 to get back home.

Over the weekend, arrangements were made to fly the group out of Ghana to Amsterdam aboard a KLM Royal Dutch Airlines plane. KLM has regular service to Accra from Amsterdam.

Half the team arrived back at O'Hare Airport in Chicago on Tuesday and five other church members, including Brannon returned Wednesday.

The first five flew to Detroit from Amsterdam aboard a Northwest Airlines plane. They arrived at O'Hare around 6 p.m. Tuesday.

"We're so glad they're back," said the Rev. Alma Cordova, associate pastor of the Waukegan church. "We're praising the Lord."

The national church paid the air fare for all 10 mission workers, said Kerri Ellis of Winthrop Harbor, wife of John Ellis Jr., one of the Africa volunteers. "It was around \$2,300 each," she said.

Efforts will be made to recover the money from Ghana Airways, said Matt Towson, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park. The U.S. Embassy in Accra was helpful in arranging the group's departure, he said.

Six church members lost their luggage on their way to Ghana. The luggage was found in New York - it apparently was never loaded aboard the Ghana Airways DC-10 that flew them to Accra - and church members had to pay to have it returned to Chicago, Mrs. Ellis said.

The Free Methodist Church group was scheduled to stay in Ghana until Saturday, completing a two-week mission at a school construction project.

They left early because they had just two options, "to leave early or leave late," Mrs. Ellis said. Church members chose to leave immediately because some had to return to their jobs, she said.

"We're just happy they're back," she said. "It's wonderful they're home."

Ghana Airways flights were banned from the U.S. because the airline ignored orders to ground unsafe aircraft and was flying on an expired operating license, the FAA said.

The action was called unprecedented by officials.

Until a week ago Tuesday, Ghana Airways operated two round-trip flights weekly between Accra and New York and Baltimore.